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DMME Deputy Director Benny Wampler Honored For Significant Contributions

*One of Five Recognized in honor of 30th Anniversary of
Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act*

Richmond, VA – Virginia Department of Mines, Minerals and Energy Deputy Director Benny Wampler was recently recognized along with four other people who have made significant contributions to the regulation of coal mines and the reclamation of mined lands. Wampler and the others were honored August 3 in Washington, DC, on the 30th Anniversary of a landmark environmental law.

The five individuals were recognized at a ceremony at the headquarters of the U.S. Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement (OSM) in Washington. Each was introduced by OSM and Department of the Interior officials and commended for their “many years of service and unrelenting commitment” to the goals of the Surface Mining Reclamation and Control Act of 1977.

Benny Wampler has been with Virginia’s Department of Mined Land Reclamation (DMLR) program from the very beginning. He was hired by Virginia in 1978 to develop a state program to implement the new federal law regulating coal mining. Since then, Wampler has earned a reputation nationwide as an innovator who consistently seeks creative and common sense solutions to the administration of this complex law.

In 1986, Wampler was named Deputy Director for the Virginia Department of Mines, Minerals, and Energy (DMME). Working closely with former DMME Director Gene Dishner, Wampler helped establish the agency as a model in the strategic management of its programs and

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resources and by focusing on the needs of its primary customers and stakeholders - the regulated mining and gas and oil industries and citizens affected by extraction activities. His success was reflected in DMME's recognition by the U.S. Senate Productivity and Quality Award Program with its Medallion of Performance Excellence in 1996 and Award for Continuing Excellence in 2001.

DMME mine inspectors are some of the most highly trained and best equipped of any in the nation. Wampler helped pioneer the computerization of permit applications, forms and enforcement and AML processes. All inspectors are equipped with laptop computers containing all approved mine permits and software that enable inspectors to track new applications, view permit information including maps, enter inspection, complaint and violation data, print forms and maintain diaries. Information can be updated daily via uploads and downloads. These computer and software applications have been benchmarked by several other state coal programs and continue to serve as a model. Wampler also helped establish the DMME University where agency employees can access internal and external training.

Long before the Quecreek Mine entrapment, the DMME had been compiling mine maps in digital format since 1992. With the coal industry and federal Office of Surface Mining's assistance, DMME has located and identified thousands of mines. This information is now being used to help ensure the safety of underground miners and the public. Wampler was a driving force in cooperation with DMME's Division of Mineral Resources (Virginia's geological survey) in seeking the continued funding and development of this important project. DMME has taken this project on the road nationwide on countless occasions to share this information and has also worked closely with the Office of Surface Mining and Mine Safety and Health Administration to obtain maps to continue the expansion of the database.

Addressing the thousands of acres of low-priority abandoned mine land (AML) environmental problems in Virginia provided another challenge to Wampler that resulted in the creation of remining incentives. Using a variety of incentives including AML no-cost agreements, AML enhancement, and alternate effluent discharge limits, the remining program and Virginia mine operators have achieved the reclamation of AML that otherwise might never have been reclaimed, enabled the recovery of additional coal resources and supported the employment of Virginia miners.

OSM recently commemorated the 30th Anniversary of SMCRA by focusing on the people who have made it successful, recognizing the work of all Federal, State and Tribal employees past and present in addition to the five individuals selected for special recognition. Others recognized by the U.S. Department of Interior and federal Office of Surface Mining were:

- **Joseph L. Blackburn**, Program Manager for Field Support at OSM's Lexington, KY, Field Office;
- **Mike Kastl**, Director of the Oklahoma Abandoned Mine Land (AML) Reclamation Program;
- **Dean Spindler**, Supervisor of Operations/Soil Scientist for the Illinois Office of Mines and Minerals, Land Reclamation Division; and
- **Dwight Thomas**, Acting Director, OSM's Tulsa, OK, Field Office.

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The Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act (SMCRA) was sponsored by Rep. Morris K. Udall and 17 co-sponsors. When it was signed by President Jimmy Carter August 2, 1977, it created the federal authority under which all surface coal mining regulation and reclamation programs in the country operate. It established the US Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement to work cooperatively with the coal States and Tribes to implement the Act.

Since 1977 SMCRA has proven to be a dynamic tool for protecting citizens and restoring mined lands. Since it's enactment about 2 million acres have been mined and reclaimed and about 240,000 acres of high-priority abandoned mine hazards have been eliminated through the collaborative efforts of thousands of dedicated Federal, State and Tribal professionals. In Virginia, 101,341 acres have been mined and reclaimed and 15,112 acres of high-priority abandoned mine hazards have been eliminated by dedicated DMME professionals since the enactment of SMCRA.

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